

Year-Round Schools Look Better All the Time

By Vanessa St. Gerard
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FOR as long as many of us can remember, summer usually has been the time for kids to get nearly three months off for the purpose of enjoying family vacations, attending camp, and just being lazy. However, the 75 or so lazy days of summer have now reached the point where they have dwindled down to about 50 as more and more of our schools have been finding themselves in the process of adopting school schedules that run the whole year round.

Nearly 2.2 million students enrolled in more than 3,000 K-12 schools followed a year-round schedule during the 2005-06 school year, according to figures which have been furnished by the National Association for Year-Round Educa-

tion. This number of students represents an 11% increase when compared with the figure of five years ago, along with a 39% increase when compared with the figures for a decade ago, according to Sam Pepper, who serves in the capacity of executive director for that organization.

The reasons that explain why it is that schools are making the switch over from traditional school schedules to year-round or modified schedules actually vary. But the end result which is achieved by making this change is usually a better use of time and resources for all of the stakeholders who are involved here. "Once you're into that type of routine, we're making better use of our day [and] we're mak-

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ing better use of our time," Pepper says.

One of the main reasons for which school officials consider a modified schedule is for the purpose of addressing the problem of "summer learning loss." Summer learning loss is a term which was penned by researchers who have studied the negative effect which long summers are now known to have on students.

In 1996, Psychology Professor Harris M. Cooper conducted a study which was eventually published under the title, "The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review." That study found that all students lose some of their math and spelling skills, and many lose reading skills over the period of the traditional summer break.

Using a modified schedule—defined by the National Association for Year-Round Education (NAYRE) as a schedule which contains no break lasting longer than eight weeks—schools are able to keep their students in a learning mode around the entire year.

While using the revised school schedule, "Children have the advantage of not losing information over the long summer," says Judith Jackson, who holds the post of principal of Franconia Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia. "They retain all that and it's great ... Teachers don't have to spend a month to six weeks reviewing."

Jackson's school has been making use of a modified schedule for the past five years.

For the sake of comparison, the traditional school year comprises large blocks of instruction with interspersed week-long breaks, all culminating with a longer summer break. However, during a modified school year, instruction periods typically are broken up into 45- or 60-day sessions, with each of these being divided by breaks lasting three to four weeks. The year ends with a summer break lasting for a period of about five weeks. Of course, both schedules include the mandated 180 days of instruction.

Intersessions

One of the advantages of the periodic breaks, both Pepper and Jackson point out, is the use of intersessions, which provide time for remediation during the fall, winter, and spring breaks. If a student has fallen behind, his or her parent can opt to have the student attend an intersession. Enrichment-type classes also are offered to students during this time. "They are a key component of any kind of modified schedule," Pepper says.

One of the other reasons that schools are drawn to the year-round schedule is to help ease overcrowding. Using what is called a multi-track schedule, schools divide teachers and students into groups, or tracks, of about the same size. Teachers and students who are as-

signed to a particular track follow the same schedule and are on vacation at the same time.

At any one time, there is always at least one track that is on vacation or intersession during the school year. Thus, schools are able to handle more students than building capacity allows, since a fraction (one-fourth for four-track schools, for example) of enrolled students are always on break.

More K-8 Schools


In 2005-06, about 2,200 public elementary schools and nearly 300 public middle schools in the United States were following a modified schedule, according to NAYRE data. That equates to more than 1.8 million K-8 students. Pepper says that more K-8 schools are transitioning from a traditional schedule to a modified schedule than high schools because high school officials fear the year-round schedules will affect after-school activities, especially athletics.

"We're seeing more and more elementary schools look at the option [of changing to a modified schedule] and proceed," Pepper says. "In K-8, there are more opportunities to set a balanced foundation."

And modified schedules aren't advantageous only to English-language learners, less affluent students, and special-needs students. "It helps all students," says Jackson.

Teachers prefer the year-round schedule as well, Jackson says, because unlike the traditional schedule whose extended breaks do not necessarily fall at the end of an academic period (i.e., quarter or semester), the end of a session during the year-round schedule corresponds with the beginning of a break. So, instead of returning from winter break to teach for just a few weeks in January before closing out the grading period, teachers following year-round schedules simply wrap up the unit before the break, Jackson explains.

As for any drawbacks of a year-round schedule, Jackson says that the main adjustment was the smaller amount of preparation time between one school year and the next, especially working out class schedules for students and teachers. "We learned very quickly that before we go home [for the summer] ... you have to have a lot of things in place," she says, adding, "You just have to pace it appropriately since you don't have much time."

Despite this, Jackson believes that the year-round schedule has been a welcome change at her school and is beneficial to her students, staff, and parents. Jackson and her staff adopted the modified schedule because they were looking for a way to help student achievement, and have found that the revised schedule has definitely contributed to this. 

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